



South Dakota Department of the Military South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs



927TH WELCOMED HOME

A welcome home ceremony was held for 14 soldiers of the 927th Engineer Detachment (Survey and Design Team), South Dakota Army National Guard, Sunday, April 21, at the Holiday Inn City Center in Sioux Falls, after completing a nine-month deployment to Kuwait and Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

"We are so thankful to be home," said Chief Warrant Officer 4 Kenneth Shoenfelder, 927th commander. "We have made a lot of contributions in Kuwait and Afghanistan. I am very proud of what our soldiers did and we appreciate everyone's support."

The Sioux Falls-based 927th planned, conducted, prepared and provided planning studies and tests for identified engineer work projects for U.S. forces in the region. They also provided guidance, legal descriptions, certification and surveys for engineer projects.

Lt. Gov. Matt Michels, U.S. Sen. John Thune and Maj. Gen. Tim Reisch, the adjutant general of the SDNG, were featured speakers at the ceremony.

"To members of the 927th, welcome home. All these soldiers have made many sacrifices and Gov. Dugaard and I want to thank each and every one of you," said Lt. Gov. Michels. "You went above and beyond and you didn't have to, but you did. Thank you for your hard work and dedication."

"Thank you for your service, determination, professionalism, courage, and sacrifice, and thank you to the families and community who support these soldiers while they were gone," said Sen. Thune. "We live in a dangerous world, there are people who want to kill and harm Americans because of who we are, and we have to protect and defend this country. You have all helped to protect this country."

"You performed a critical mission, and the job you did overseas was outstanding," said Maj. Gen. Reisch. "The South Dakota National Guard has a tremendous legacy, and the performance of this unit has without a question added to the great legacy of this state."

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AMERICAN VETERANS TRAVELING TRIBUTE TO BE IN HOT SPRINGS

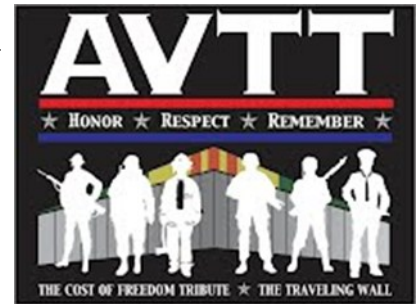
The Legion Riders of American Legion Post 71 in Hot Springs and the community of Hot Springs are honoring South Dakota's veterans by bringing the "Cost of Freedom American Veterans Traveling Tribute" to Hot Springs July 31- Aug 4.

In addition they will be hosting the annual "Freedom Ride Poker Run" on August 4, 2013. Registration will begin at 9:00 am at the Michael J. Fitzmaurice State Veterans Home (2500 Minnekahta Avenue) in Hot Springs. Riders will depart from the Home at 11:00 am. To pre-register go to the Registration Waiver Form link: <https://sites.google.com/site/legionriderspost71/>

During this tribute, they will also have the Agent Orange "Quilt of Tears" on display at the Hot Springs Mueller Center (801 S. 6th Street) from July 31-August 4. The Quilts draw national attention to the plight of Veterans and their families affected by Agent Orange used during the Vietnam War.

More information on these event can be found at: <https://sites.google.com/site/legionriderspost71/> and at www.legionriderspost71.com

South Dakota's Fallen Heroes banners will be on Display August 1-2, 2013, in Hot Springs.



RAPID CITY GUARD UNIT BACK ON U.S. SOIL

Nineteen soldiers from Detachment 1, Company B, 935th Support Battalion, South Dakota Army National Guard, arrived in the United States on April 21, after serving a nine-month deployment to Kuwait in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Members of the Rapid City-based 935th arrived in Fort Hood, Texas, and will spend about a week here completing de-mobilization requirements before returning to South Dakota.

The 935th's mission was to provide aviation maintenance and repair support to the 35th Combat Aviation Brigade. The unit specializes in maintenance and repair of rotary-wing aircraft to include the UH-60 Black Hawk, OH-58 Kiowa, and other U.S. Army rotary aircraft.

No details of the unit's arrival to South Dakota or welcome home ceremony are known at this time.



OPERATION BLACK HILLS CABIN

Community leaders and veterans gathered in Custer last week for the official ribbon cutting ceremony and open house at Operation Black Hills Cabin. Operation Black Hills Cabin is a 1,200 square-foot home located on the edge of Custer.

The home will be made available for six months of the year to disabled veterans and their families. The first occupants of the home move in April 19th.

Secretary Larry Zimmerman, South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs, says he is excited about this project and the opportunities it will provide for South Dakota's heroes and their families.

County Veterans Service Officers Robert Wagner (Butte), Ken Irwin (Custer) and Wendy Weakland (Fall River) also attended the open house.

Veterans interested in taking part in the program can get more information at www.operationblackhillscabin.org.



Operation Black Hills Cabin Board of Directors



CVSOs Wagner, Irwin and Weakland



Secretary Zimmerman commending the project leaders.

VA TO EXPEDITE CLAIMS DECISIONS

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced it is implementing an initiative to expedite compensation claims decisions for veterans who have waited one year or longer. Effective April 19, VA claims raters will make provisional decisions on the oldest claims in inventory, which will allow veterans to begin collecting compensation benefits more quickly, if eligible. Veterans will be able to submit additional evidence for consideration a full year after the provisional rating, before the VA issues a final decision.

“Too many veterans wait too long for a decision, and this has never been acceptable,” said VA Secretary Eric Shinseki. “That is why we are implementing an aggressive plan to eliminate the backlog in 2015. This initiative is the right thing to do now for veterans who have waited the longest.”

Provisional decisions will be based on all evidence provided to date by the veteran or obtained on their behalf by the VA. If a VA medical examination is needed to decide the claim, it will be ordered and expedited.

“Issuing provisional decisions not only provides veterans with applicable benefits much more quickly, but also gives them an additional one-year safety net to submit further evidence should it become available. Our door will remain open and if a veteran has additional evidence, their case will be fast tracked,” said Allison Hickey, Undersecretary for Benefits.

If any increase is determined to be warranted based on the additional evidence received, benefits will be retroactive to the date the claim was initially filed. The initiative protects the veteran’s right to appeal the decision. If no further evidence is received within that year, VBA will inform the veteran that their rating is final and provide information on the standard appeals process, which can be found at <http://www.bva.va.gov/>

Throughout this initiative, the VA will continue to prioritize claims for homeless veterans and those claiming financial hardship, the terminally ill, former Prisoners of War, Medal of Honor recipients, and veterans filing Fully Developed Claims. More information about filing Fully Developed Claims is available at: <http://www.benefits.va.gov/transformation/fastclaims/>

Claims for Wounded Warriors separating from the military for medical reasons will continue to be handled separately and on a priority basis with the Department of Defense through the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES). Wounded Warriors separating through IDDES currently receive VA compensation benefits in an average of 61 days following their separation from service.

As a result of this initiative, metrics used to track benefits claims will experience significant fluctuations. The focus on processing the oldest claims will cause the overall measure of the average length of time to complete a claim—currently 286 days—to skew, rising significantly in the near term because of the number of old claims that will be completed. Over time, as the backlog of oldest claims is cleared and more of the incoming claims are processed electronically through VA’s new paperless processing system, VA’s average time to complete claims will significantly improve. In addition, the average days pending metric— or the average age of a claim in the inventory – will decrease, since the oldest claims will no longer be part of the inventory.

While compensation claims are pending, eligible veterans are able to receive healthcare and other benefits from the VA. Veterans who have served in recent conflicts are eligible for five years of free healthcare from the VA. Currently, over 55% of returning Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans are using VA health care, a rate of utilization greater than previous generations of Veterans.

Veterans can learn more about disability benefits on the joint Department of Defense—VA web portal *eBenefits* at: <https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits-portal/ebenefits.portal>

VOLUNTEERS RECOGNIZED

April 21-27 is National Volunteer Week and it is a great opportunity for the VA and the Michael J. Fitzmaurice State Veterans Home to recognize their citizen volunteers.

Every year, thousands of South Dakotans join the millions of their fellow volunteers across the country in thanking veterans for their service. These volunteers are driven with a patriotic enthusiasm to use their unique talents and skills for improving veterans' lives.

During 2012, the VABHHCS had more than 300 volunteers provide more than 40,000 hours of service to veterans. On the eastern side of the state, the Sioux Falls VAHCS recognized 540 volunteers for the 82,734 hours of caring for and assisting veterans. During the volunteer banquet at the Michael J. Fitzmaurice State Veterans Home, 203 volunteers were recognized for over 6,900 volunteer hours. This number does not include volunteers that assist with road trips or the soldiers/airmen from the South Dakota National Guard and Ellsworth Air Force Base that volunteer their services to assist South Dakota's veterans.

Secretary Zimmerman attended the volunteer banquet at the Michael J. Fitzmaurice State Veterans Home and took the opportunity to thank the volunteers for their service to South Dakota's veterans. He noted that although these numbers are huge, they are not inclusive. Within all of South Dakota's communities we have numerous veterans service organizations that commit themselves to assisting South Dakota's veterans. All of their time is volunteered as well, plus they provide monetary contributions assisting veterans facilities and their residents. In addition, we have members of the South Dakota National Guard and their families that volunteer and assist veterans in their communities. It is impossible to put our arms around a true number. Volunteers are a priceless asset to our veterans!



WE  VE
OUR VOLUNTEERS

WE  VE
OUR VOLUNTEERS

VETERANS BENEFITS FAIR

The Sioux Falls VA Health Care System welcomes all veterans and their families to an open house and Veterans Benefits Fair at the Watertown VA Outpatient Clinic May 2, 2013. This event will take place at 917 29th Street SE from 4:00-7:00 PM.

A special invitation is extended to veterans who currently do not use VA services. VA staff will explain VA eligibility and health care. In addition, VA Regional Office staff will also be there to discuss compensation benefits, including those for veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange. Health screenings, tours of the clinic, and refreshments will be available. To assist in applying for benefits, Veterans should bring copies of their discharge papers (DD214) and their last income tax Form 1040.

Questions, please call the clinic at 605-884-2420, Ext. 2221.

**Get Your Questions Answered
by Veterans Benefits Experts**



WOMEN VETERANS CALL CENTER

On April 23, 2013, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) launched its new Women Veterans hotline—1-855-VA-WOMEN (1-855-829-6636)—an incoming call center that receives and responds to questions from women veterans, their families, and caregivers across the nation about available VA services and resources.

Since 2000, the number of women using VA health care has more than doubled, from nearly 160,000 to more than 360,000 in 2012. Women now make up 15 percent of active duty and 18 percent of Guard/Reserves service members. Based on the upward trend of women in all branches of service, the number of women veterans and female VA users is expected to double again in the next decade. Despite this rapid growth, women constitute only six percent of the VA's total patient population. The VA has also found that women veterans underutilize VA care, largely due to a lack of knowledge about VA benefits and available services. In response, an outbound Call Center was established in 2010 to contact women veterans and encourage them to try VA care. It has been expanded, and the Call Center's telephone agents now receive incoming calls and inquiries about VA care and other services for women.

They are informed about eligibility, benefits, health care and other services, and can route calls within VA when needed. Agents are also trained to respond to crisis situations such as suicidal behavior, homelessness, sexual trauma, and domestic violence.

1-855-VA-WOMEN (1-855-829-6636) provides a single avenue for women veterans to get the help they need.



Upcoming Events

Apr. 27—Vietnam Veterans Memorial Ceremony—Anderson Park—Aberdeen—11:00 am
 May 2—Open House—Watertown CBOC—4:00—7:00 pm
 May 3-5—DAV State Convention—The Lodge—Deadwood
 May 11—Yellow Ribbon for the 935th—Rapid City
 May 15—Sioux Falls Vets Center Open House—3200 W. 49th Street—11:00 am—2:00 pm.
 May 19—Yellow Ribbon for the 927th—Sioux Falls
 May 21—SDDVA Spring Mini Conference—Sturgis Veterans Club (868 Main Street) - 10:00 am
 May 22—SDDVA Spring Mini Conference—Pierre American Legion (520 S. Pierre Street) - 10:00 am
 May 23—SDDVA Spring Mini Conference—Brookings City/County Bldg (520 3rd Street) - 10:00 am
 May 27—MJFSVH Groundbreaking Ceremony—1:00 pm
 Jun. 6-9—American Legion State Convention—Ramkota Hotel/Conference Center—Rapid City
 Jun. 13-16—VFW State Convention—Watertown Convention Center
 Jul. 1—Black Hills National Cemetery Unaccompanied Veterans Memorial Service—9:00 am
 Jul. 8—SD Veterans Council—DAV Headquarters—Sioux Falls—10:30 am
 Jul. 26—Korean War Commemoration Display—SDNG Museum—Pierre
 Jul. 27—Korean War Wreath Laying Ceremony at the SD State Capitol—Pierre
 Jul. 31– Aug. 4—American Veterans Traveling Tribute—Hot Springs
 Aug. 4—Freedom Poker Ride—Hot Springs
 Aug. 24-25—Freedom Bird 2013—W. H. Lyon Fairgrounds—Sioux Falls 10:00 am—5:00 pm
 Aug. 26-28—VSO Annual Benefits School—Ramkota Hotel—Pierre
 Oct. 1—Black Hills National Cemetery Unaccompanied Veterans Memorial Service—9:00 am
 Dec. 15—Wreaths Across America Ceremony—Black Hills National Cemetery—10:00 am

**Veterans
Crisis Line**



1-800-273-8255
PRESS 1

IT'S YOUR CALL

Confidential help for
Veterans and their families

To talk to the VA BHHCS
Suicide Prevention Coordinator
call 605-347-2511 x 7087



Confidential chat at VeteransCrisisLine.net or text to 838255

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